Syrian Cultural Priorities

Conversations About Contemporary Cultural Practices

Syria as a Model (2017-2020)

Prepared and presented by
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Mohamad Omran

Visual Artist & Sculptor

Mohammad Omran

Born in Damascus in 1979, Omran graduated from the Department of Sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts - Damascus University in 2000, where he worked as a teaching assistant from 2005 until 2007. He holds a Master's degree in History of Contemporary Art from the University of Lyon 2, France in 2009.

Omran has participated in many solo and group exhibitions in the Arab World and Europe. Most recently, he participated in the "Where is my friend's house" exhibition at the Maison des Arts de Malakoff in France. His works have been acquired by several private and public bodies, including the Arab World Institute in Paris and the British Museum in London.

Omran mainly works in sculpting and painting, but he also takes interest in other forms of art, such as stop motion animations.

Several of his reviews on contemporary Arab art have been published in Arab newspapers. He also has two studies; the first is entitled "Maher al-Baroudi, an Artist between Two Cultures. How Can We Read His Works?" and the second is called "The Image of the Tortured Body in Contemporary Syrian Art".

Omran has been living and working in the city of Ivry-sur-Seine in France since 2015.

Conversations About Contemporary Cultural Practices: Syria as a Model is a series of interviews conducted between 2017 and 2020, as part of the Syrian Cultural Priorities programme, prepared and rolled out by Ettijahat – Independent Culture. The fifth and last interview was held with visual artist Mohamad Omran in his studio in Paris.

Jumana: Mohamad Omran, you are a Syrian visual artist residing in France since 2007. You came here to complete your master's degree and then your PhD in the city of Lyon. Today, you live in Paris. Your résumé suggests that the year 2011 was a turning point in your career as an artist. What readily comes to mind here is the historical and humanitarian juncture. How do you reflect this juncture or turning point in your works, in terms of form, substance and medium?

Mohamad: The outcomes of any violent event are reflected in the cultural products that follow. My own work was no different. This is not really a turning point in the literal sense of the word, as much as it is a shocking or traumatic experience, and I tried to express that through my work.

You asked about the medium I use. I am essentially a sculptor, but I also paint all the time. During that period, I tried to focus more on painting because it satisfied an emotional need I had and because a sculpture takes much more time to be completed. As such, I felt that painting would satisfy this need more effectively at the time. The substance of my work during that period was simply a continuation of my previous works. There was also no drastic change when it came to form, but I can say that the main theme of my work is the human body. During the revolution, this body took many different forms; that is to say, the body, for example, began to clearly change into a monster. When I say "monster," I should go deeper into the meaning of the monster's body. In the past, for example, I used to work on the monster's body; i.e.; the hybrid, sometimes grotesque, body. It did not have any clear names. After the revolution, it began to take a form that represents the dictator. On the other hand, the normal body began to represent a body in crisis, a sick body in severe pain. This body started to have specific names and to represent normal Syrians. I believe this reflects the change that happened in medium and form.

Jumana: Today, we are in your studio in Ivry-sur-Seine, one of Paris's suburbs. I have previously visited you in your studio in Saroujah in Damascus. How does your current environment affect your work, and what has remained of the other place today?

Mohamad: Moving to a new place affects the artist's work. This does not mean that the previous place no longer has an impact on the present. In Saroujah, the place was more like a permanent workshop. I shared it with two other artist friends. As I mentioned, the place had been more of a workshop, and it became a meeting place. We used to receive visitors all the time. This is difficult to do here in France; although we try – as migrant artists – to meet and pursue common activities. However, the way we lived in Saroujah disappeared with that place. I think it no longer exists. What I mean to say is that my friends had to leave Saroujah, Damascus and Syria.

In reality, I can bring back the memory of Saroujah and all the places I feel close to from time to time. My feelings towards these places are no longer nostalgic. I think we all experienced these feelings at some point. That place gives me a different sort of energy. We have easier access to culture in France than in Syria, especially when it comes to visual artists, because we lived – for our entire careers – under the effect of European art. As such, being here is considered an opportunity.

I still roam around this place like a tourist, even if I do in fact live here. I am married and I have a daughter who grew up here, but I try all the time – maybe as a form of resistance – to keep a light relationship

with this place. Ever since I came here, I refused the idea of settling, although this place is rich, beautiful and full of nice people. Damascus means a lot to me, which is why I accepted the idea of coming here to study with a Syrian governmental scholarship, so that I can return and teach at the University of Damascus. However, I am not exaggerating when I say that this place fills me with positive energy. The differences I see here are enough, even at the visual level. When I take public transportation, for example, I see different people and remarkable shapes and forms. This is all visually enriching. That was not possible in Damascus. With regard to its impact on my work, I believe I am amongst those artists who have clear themes, even when my work varies, develops, and takes different forms.

I work on general themes that fit all kinds of places, rather than on clear, local themes. Humans are the same, and the human body is the same everywhere. However, I may need longer to notice the change. I will inevitably find a solution for this place's problem. I feel like I am dividing the topic into stages. I am here against my absolute will, but that's alright.

Jumana: You told me earlier about the sculptures that you were sending to Syria. I think this is a project that falls within the framework of our talk about "place."

Mohamad: Of course. The idea of visiting Syria is impossible because of my status. This project is a sort of compensation. I long for having a presence there, even if only symbolically. I decided to send small sculptures to be displayed in places that have meaning to me. The idea is to create memoirs for these sculptures, as though they were on a touristic trip and taking pictures in Saroujah, near my previous workshop, in Al-Rawda coffee shop, and in Marmar for example. These places hold a special meaning to me, and that is why I still think about them.

Jumana: My question about rebuilding the sense of place through the imagination is not addressed to you alone, or to Syrian artists alone. There are many migrant artists around the world. I noticed in the work of European artists or artists from other nationalities that rebuilding a place is very common – whether through visual arts, cinema, or other forms of art. Can we consider this a theme of contemporary art? There are migrant artists and there are receiving artists, i.e. the artists who live here, and both are affected by these demographic, geographic and social shifts. So what is the outcome of knowing many places and bringing them together in the imagination through art?

Mohamad: Yes, that's true. Migration no doubt has a significant impact on our world today. If we were to talk about contemporary art in Europe, I don't know if this could be considered a trend; because these themes are evident in the history of art. Violent events lead to large-scale migrations and a wide demographic change. Therefore, there are certainly some artists who tackle them. Today, we are personally involved in these events, and disaster has hit us directly. So we will definitely see it more clearly and personally. However, looking at the history of art, ever since humans started consciously producing works, I believe the same recurring themes were used. With regard to the imagined place, I think all artists who work on those themes are searching of a missing homeland. I think they are trying to restore a certain picture. Of course, those themes are reflected in art, but I do not believe that they constitute a current trend. They are passing in time, and their frequency differs depending on the crisis and its severity. It is true that many artists adopt the new place's theme or the idea of migration, but I think it has become a style and not a trend. All artists may be affected by this, even if they do not experience it themselves, as in the case of European artists.

Jumana: It's good that you mentioned the phenomena, as it is directly related to my next question. In the book *Assemblage*, which

you created in collaboration with author Odai Al Zoubi, the project description reads as follows, "In this work, we seek to reflect on the relationship between the individual, the crowd and the powers in Syria through nine events/incidents." The concept of 'event' here draws my attention, namely the event that leaves a mark or a junction in historical events. In fact, this reminded me of the book *Prendre dates*, a historical record by Patrick Boucheron and Mathieu Riboulet. In the beginning of the book, the authors address the events that took place in Paris in 2015, i.e. the Charlie Hebdo incident. The introduction also mentions the risk of the disaster turning into a normal event that we can live with. From here, we understand the importance of recording history or, more accurately, of recording the day on which the events happened. So my question is: How can art keep up with an event that is – naturally – faster than it and certainly ahead of it?

Mohamad: I have the same question. I often ask myself: What makes an artist interested in documenting events? It is a very difficult task, especially for artists who do not necessarily "work" in art, in the practical sense of the term. I believe there is a need to document things. If there weren't such a need, then why strive to achieve a similar project? To talk about the *Assemblage* project specifically, I tried to make the choices that better enable the images to shape part of our collective memory, as Syrians or as residents in Syria. At the same time, I noticed that I do not want to go back to direct recording or literal documenting, even if my main sources are only images; because I believe that the creative margin lies in adding a flare to this documentation.

Today, if we have unquestionable information about the villain's identity and the non-villain's identity, we can – eventually – find a place that is fun to enter into, where we can play around with things without changing their fundamental meaning. For example, when I talk about Chirac's visit to Damascus, I see it as an ironic scene. The people of my generation and I find it funny. At first, the concept of people's relationship with authority is reflected, not only in Syria, but with any hegemonic force, seeing as they the latter is easily capable of gathering people and making them chant a person's name. When Chirac visited, authorities gathered school students and transported them in buses to chant: Vive Chirac, while holding the French flag. The funny thing is that, historically, France was an imperialist state, while in Syria, we follow the socialist camp. The result is a state of schizophrenia sometimes. Of course, a child or a teenager cannot be entirely aware of this. But we see it as ironic. We need to know where we are and what camp we follow.

I think the choice of scene opens up the imagination, so that one can produce different variations of an event, or combine the fundamental reality of the main event to the personal desire to add to it, as if the artists – or I – have a desire to keep a double documentation or a different form of documentation. In other words, it is true that the incident is the way it is, but it also transforms into the way i perceive it. It is a viewpoint stemming from a truth, from reality, and it does not necessarily have to make sense in other places. For example, the scene of people migrating from Yarmouk Camp is a violent and tragic scene. It was very difficult to express it through painting. The outcome was similar to the truth, but it was not necessarily a tangible or realistic truth. As such, the representation does not necessarily have to simulate reality so much, nor does it have to be represented realistically. However, the scale of destruction, as well as the people migrating and leaving their homes, were depicted. I personally need this margin to play around with the work, if I could call it that, in order to have a balanced relationship with the memory and to be able to share this memory, which belongs to all of us, in my own way.

Jumana: It seems the topic also involves distance. When you mention Chirac's visit to Damascus as an event that could be seen in an ironic and funny way, the painful thing is that it's difficult to respond to this

pain by adding distance. You mentioned documentation. I believe some Syrian artists and other artists who lived through the horrors of war and other terrible experiences write history in places where true history cannot be written. You also mentioned that we might know who the villain is, and who the non-villain is, but there are many things that we do not know. From what you've seen in Syria or in other places, to what extent do you, or the artists of your generation, think that art can record and write history and can document or search for the truth?

Mohamad: Perhaps the question we can ask is to what extent can art carry out this task. Is this art's mission under difficult circumstances? I look for answers to these questions in a practical way. For me, the persistent question is this: What is the purpose of art? In my opinion, what happened in Syria automatically pushed people who work in the creative and cultural fields, and whose path was not violently changed, to rethink their relationship with the place.

Documentation stems from the artist's personal desire to not forget the incident and from the desire to share it with others. This question is difficult to answer. What's the motive? When faced with a violent scene, you can see the massacre unfold before you, which I find scary. What pushes the artist to recreate the massacre in a different way? We are not talking today about the WWII era. When we discuss about the Guernica massacre, we automatically think about Picasso and the Guernica painting. It has even become the icon of massacres, violence and barbarism. Today, we have YouTube, where it is possible to enter the massacre's date in a region in Syria and see the corpses and body parts. I also believe in the artist's historical role of documenting the events in their own way. Goya worked on documenting the event, and I – of course – want to document it as well.

Today, this task has not changed much, despite the diversity of available tools. The bet remains on the future, that we can someday remember a massacre that happened in Syria through a work of art. Documentation may be an artist's desire to express themselves as a witness to the events. I am part of what happened, even if I was far from the slaughter. It is my personal experience too, and I want to talk about it and document it. I want to express it in different ways and by using more than one medium. I believe we should not forget about what happened in Syria. This is what brings me back to what you said about the risk of these incidents becoming normal. It is strange to perceive these events as something normal. And this is what is happening. But I do not have an answer to your question about the motive. The motive is yet another thing that I cannot explain.

Jumana: The introduction of *Assemblage* refers to the need to not completely separate between politics and art, while emphasizing the importance of not turning the product into propaganda. What is the importance of initiating political presentation in art, at a time described as a source of collective concern, to say the least? All humanity shares this concern, whether in relation to revolutions, wars, migrations, natural disasters, epidemics, or economic crises.

Mohamad: In reality, one's vision should not be restricted to politics alone. In my opinion, this is what limits the vision. What I mean to say is that even if a final artwork covers certain topics in a direct way, classifying it as direct political art will limit the vision in one way or another. I think it is an invitation for the public to see the product. It is a creative product that has its own problems too. I don't know if we can currently sever the close ties with the Syrian events or say, 'this product or this artwork is weak.' It is not enough for a work to be about the revolution or Syria for us to say, 'it's a great piece of work.' On the other hand, you see other intimate and simple works that talk about that place in a different way. We should not ridicule or underestimate them just because they do not have an evident revolutionary dimension, a

clear structure or an obvious political affiliation. We often marginalize them for these reasons and say, 'it is not art.'

I think everyone hits that bump at some point, and faces an evaluation on the basis of political affiliation, or rather based on how close or far it comes to the wound. I think that everything is permissible, or should be permissible. Thus, in *Assemblage's* introduction, we wanted to emphasize the importance of these works being seen, and we did not overlook the idea that the work is political. It is a difficult issue. We do not claim offer a lens through which works can be viewed; rather, the book is an invitation to see our work the way we created it.

Jumana: Today, can an artist not be political?

Mohamad: I do not have an answer to this question. Not in the sense of a producing political works. I've been working for a while now on a particular theme. It is not necessarily political, but you can see it as a political theme. Personally, I cannot describe myself as a committed artist, in the rigid sense of the word, because it limits my relationship with others and my work vision. It is certainly important to me that my work be seen, and I would love for my work and my messages to reach everyone.

In the end, it is possible to have a non-political vision. Any person can see the work as political and can interpret it as political. This is not something new. It was happening when I first started out and ever since I began to build a relationship with the body and with the characters I create from fixed objects, such as the chair, which I used as a basis for my work at the time and which could be interpreted politically. At the time, the matter did not concern me. I might be influenced by such matters, or maybe there are unconscious influences in my artwork. But the political topic was not my concern at the time, and my goal was not to make fun of a man in power when I merged people with the chair. I also consider restricting a vision to a political dimension is superficial. At the time, I was concerned with how to create a different and new visual relationship, and to what extent I could deform or play around with things. That was my concern, and it still is to this day.

Jumana; You graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts Damascus. Can you tell me about the curriculum in Syria? Can you describe your formation as an artist through these curricula and your surrounding environment?

Mohamad: In our first year, we learn general information about every type of art, including oil painting, sculpting, engraving and graphics, visual communications, media, and interior design. In our second year, each of us enrolls in the specialization we prefer. I wanted to join the Department of Sculpture. Of course, there are many factors that led to me choosing this specialization. I was born in a family that had clear artistic tendencies. I also happened to meet sculptor Fayez Nahri, who died last year. At the time, I was in ninth or tenth grade, and I met this artist through my sister's friend, who was a sculptor himself. I think that it when I fell in love with sculpting.

For me, the world of sculpting was very rich. Fayez Nahri had an improvised workshop in a garden in the Tijara neighborhood of Damascus. He is sort of a strange man. When I met him for the first time, he was molding a statue of the Virgin Mary with four other guys. I think he had an order to deliver. It was the first time I saw the molding process, with all the molds and clay. It was a magical world to me. I decided I wanted to come to this person's place all the time, and I did. It was my first experience with Fayez Nahri, and I owe him to this day.

I cannot deny that the faculty was a very important meeting point. I was able to get to know people who came from different governorates. As such, I got to know Syria, in one way or another. The faculty also allowed us to test our creative processes. The professors were not always good. To be fair, I can say that 90% of faculty members were

administrative officers who considered their job to be rigid for several reasons which are difficult to mention, such as artistic modesty. Some of them were artistically weak, with no potential to become professors, and some were disappointed because their ambition was to become more active, and were eventually disappointed because the place does not allow you to be different. I'm not saying the faculty did not have good professors. In my personal experience in sculpting, there were two people I could really connect with. There wasn't any strong relationship between the professor and the student, but I had the chance to learn from older colleagues.

There were people who really helped me and provided me with more knowledge at the levels of my thinking and my technique. The professors' role came in second or third. The curriculum was essentially practical. 60% of our studies were practical, while 40% were theoretical. The theoretical part was also very limited and insignificant. We learned at a later stage general information on the history of art, architecture, aesthetics, Arabic calligraphy, and anatomy. The best I can say is that the curricula were ordinary.

After my graduation, I completed two years of higher education studies and received the Diploma of Higher Education in the same specialization. At that time, I started to see the difference. I began working on seminars and on how to research a particular topic. We were lucky to have two good professors. There were professors who studied in France or the Western countries, but many of the professors also studied in the Soviet Union or the socialist camp. So we were lucky to get to know two directions, two curricula and two trends at the faculty.

Unfortunately, the state of stagnation was clear. I had to familiarize myself with all media, including the most modern media, or I had to learn about them from an older friend. The idea of using artistic equipment was a taboo at the faculty of fine arts. I think things are a little bit different now. Being familiar with modern media does not mean entering modernism at all. I am against the idea anyway. But, at least, it helps us understand that there isn't only one form of art, or that sculpting is the mass's relationship with the void, which is true; but sculpting is also broader than that. We were remiss in that regard, and we lacked culture and awareness or were unwilling to learn, I don't know what to call it. Still, it was a beautiful experience. I love the Faculty of Fine Arts. This is why I said: I can travel and come back to work on making a change with my friends. The place deserves it.

Jumana: Did you study the history of Syrian art or Arab art?

Mohamad: During our diploma years, we studied the history of Arab art. The class was taught by Afif Bahnassi. The material was good and I learned about two Arab artists that I did not know about before.

Jumana: How was the relationship with the local heritage? The visual art pioneers in Syria for example. These materials were not in the foundation courses, but rather in the diploma stage only.

Mohamad: These topics were marginalized. In fact, it was strange. The student could give a seminar on a pioneering artist. There is no real documentation. There is only documentation of the pioneer movement in Syria and the Arab world, but it was not included in the main curriculum.

Joumama: I say this because in the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, we did not know much about Arab theatre, and I can say that most forms of art were unknown at the local and regional levels. This information was not taught.

Mohamad: I don't think it is intentional. I think there's an agreement about what important subjects should students learn about. Perhaps those who prepared the curriculum considered that students should seek to satisfy their own personal curiosity. I am not against the idea. What I mean to say is that you should search on your own too, but I think it is important to provide a basic knowledge base that you could build your research on. Unfortunately, that did not exist.

Jumana: Don't you think that the absence of local or regional content within the curricula of art, theatre and music institutes is a result of their absence from the history of art in general?

Mohamad: At the global level, this content was not absent, but it had a weak presence. I believe modern workshops and studios are important at the local level. Globally - and what I'm going to say is not a derogation from the contemporary visual movement in our country, for it was influenced by the Western visual movement - when we talk about arts in the region, we talk a little about architecture, both Christian and Muslim. On the other hand, the contemporary art movement began as a modest and humble movement. And perhaps for this reason, its pioneers were influenced by the classical method, at a time when contemporary arts began to appear. There is no parallelism. I don't know how important this is to the West.

I think it is important to study these things in their local and historical context. Whether we liked them or not, the Egyptian Surrealists created a movement with a presence and references to follow, and they are ultimately surrealists. In Iraq for example, groups were formed, which is a nice phenomenon to witness. Unfortunately, in Syria, we did not have this phenomenon, or maybe these groups did not form properly. These movements have a Western influence. This was the challenge at the time, and not in the visual or cultural arts only: how to make a society contemporary or more modern. I take the West as an example. I now have a desire to move towards modernism in its Western sense.

In Syria, there are no such cases at the local level. There are great artists who left a significant impact. And they each make up a school on their own. Fateh Moudarres, for example, created a trend. But there is no collective case. There are people who left a significant impact, even if their paintings are not great, but they created a path for change. Mahmoud Hammad, for example, made that change happen. He was a teacher and an artist. When you try to analyze his paintings from a global perspective, you begin to wonder: Are they modernist? Are they strange? Not necessarily. The important thing is how we see them, this is our artistic heritage.

Jumana: This is what captures my attention. A fine arts student in Damascus is introduced to the Renaissance era more than the surrealist movement in Egypt. I mentioned that these works are not that important in our present time anymore, but it is a geographically close movement, and the student knows nothing about it.

Mohamad: There are significant shortcomings, including in how we see ourselves. But the comparison between professionals in Syria and Egypt is unfair, because there are many differences. The art faculty was founded in Egypt in 1910, if I'm not mistaken, while it was founded in 1960 in Syria. I think the situation in Egypt today is a disaster. When we visited Egypt in the early 2000s, there was a modern art museum, which displayed works from the 1930s and 1940s. These works were intimidating for a fine arts student like me, but it was a powerful modern arts museum. Paintings in Syria had a more significant presence, while sculpting is still neglected to this day.

Jumana: Let us delve further into this subject. We have been witnessing in recent years attempts to remove the colonial touch from

the history of art, by researchers, curators and even artists. We can take artist Kader Attia as an example. He is an Algerian artist who created a space in France called The Colony (La colonie), whose main goals included instigating a critical discourse on artistic practices that come from marginalized places, in order to continue the idea we started before. From my observation of the French art scene in particular, and the European art scene in general, it seems to me that the non-European artistic products that comes from Africa or South America, for example, are able to find their place within these initiatives more easily or more smoothly than the products coming from Syria or the Levant in general. This means that it is easier for me to see a painting, installation, theatre play, or a movie from Algeria, Congo or Columbia than to watch a movie from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon or Palestine.

Mohamad: I do not know if there is a historical relationship with colonizing nations. That is to say, even if there are issues related to racism, Algerian artists have a wider presence than artists from the Levant. Maybe this is because of their relationship with the colonizer or their historical relationship with the place, or with African artists. I have the same opinion, and this takes us back to what we said earlier, that the local touch in products of artists coming from North Africa, or the themes they work on, are associated with their relationship with the place here in France, with France's relationship with these countries. With regard to Middle Eastern countries or Egypt to a certain extent, there is perhaps no enthusiasm for the local product, with the exception of certain circumstances. This means that there will be excitement towards a certain work in a country experiencing change, out of a desire to know its completely shrouded society.

Jumana: With regard to Egypt, which you took as an example, in 2011, 2012, and 2013, there was interest in the Egyptian product. This interest isn't there anymore. Even with graffiti and urban art, and everything that has to do with the street and the movement therein, there are things that appeared spontaneously in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. I do not know if there is still interest in them today. My question is related to something bigger. It's as if the Levant is hard to understand. As such, it is difficult to showcase its products, because we do not know in which context to situate them. As you mentioned, artists from the African continent in general can find this relationship complicated. Here in France, we are with the previous colonizer, and there is a strong shared history and old migration movements. There are also soldiers from these regions who participated in WWII with the French Army. However, our region is of a problematic nature, and even if it was under the French or British mandate, the West could not understand it, and it does not know how to talk about it in the news. I'm not sure of the extent that the impact this could have. To go back to the idea of removing the colonial touch from art, and including the arts of marginalized regions in the process of writing the history of contemporary art, we find that the products of this region are still absent. And if they are displayed, it is done within the specific context of the period from 2011 until now.

Mohamad: This is true. I believe the issue is related to an actual desire to get to know the place. Therefore, a different kind of effort should be made. It's easy to build a relationship with artists from previous colonies. As we said: it is true that the relationship is problematic, but it is also strong. Here, the relationship isn't clear. Still, there are works that achieved global presence, and were enshrined in one way or another. We can say, and not just in our country, that Mona Hatoum is a global artist. I believe the complexity of the situation stems from the way we perceive art. I do not want to generalize, but there is a certain formula, and if the artist matches that formula, regardless of the subject of their work, it would be easier for them to be accepted and connect with the audience, as well as with the institution. It would be easier for you if you were working on something conceptual, but if the artist's work depended on traditional tools, it would make the task harder. These are only possibilities. When art products from third-

world countries have the opportunity to be displayed here, we find that the product is based on local themes and uses new media in order to be accepted more easily.

The artist works on a personal subject. It does not necessarily have to be important. If the work is strong and durable, it won't matter. Curators do not care if the artist works on a painting. As long as the artwork is strong and durable, the artist's subjectivity does not necessarily have to be linked to an important matter. Curators do not care about what is important to the artist or if they work on a painting. Thus, orientalist perception hasn't changed much which still baffles me. However, everyone experiences art production since their childhood. Everyone makes carpets and rugs, works with clay, and paints on walls. But when a violent event happens, in a closed off and marginalized society, you are surprised that those people who live in a village draw on walls and do great things. Because there is a violent event, people stand up and say 'No!', but the product is normal. Everyone can do it.

I do not have a clear answer, but I think this should be a joint effort, in that people who have the capacity to document and identify contemporary art in Syria should do so. What does it mean for a European citizen who does not own any artwork or know that someone is an important artist, to see a certain artwork? They can only see beauty. This is our responsibility.

Jumana: Some people say that there is a sort of exaggeration in displaying works about Syria. When I met with director Omar Abou Saada in this discussion series, he told me, "This is not true. What is said about Syria is very little compared to the scale of the disaster." Personally, I see that the issue is not related to the number of works, but to their quality and the way they represent the event. For example: Are these works displayed because of the destruction and death scenes they contain, in some form of fetishism and fascination with this violence? Is this content being separated from its historical context? We see dead people, body parts and corpses, but we do not ask why we discuss or disregard ISIS, but we do not talk about the regime. I am not only talking here about Syrian artists' work. There are many non-Syrian artists who worked on the topic of Syria. We see it in the cinema in Insyriated and On the Other Side of Hope. What do you think?

Mohamad: I think what happened in Syria created a desire by the other side of the world to be reintroduced to the place in a different way. Unfortunately, with time, the situation became semi-normal. I am talking about the visual arts specifically, because I do not know what has been happening in the field of cinema. The other side of world could empathize. The easiest that could be done is to organize an exhibition for art coming from this region, or to hold a musical concert, or to talk about the tragedy, because the events are new and contain many scenes of violence. With time, things were no longer the same. What I consider sad is that the mindset hasn't changed. You work on something that addresses the idea of violence, and you do not consider if it is powerful or to what extent it is powerful.

Today, the situation is different, because the Syrian topic is no longer trendy. There is no more talk about regime change, a democratic change or the new society that the Syrian people want to live in. People are now talking about the withdrawals from Idlib, which is a purely military subject and does not concern the world. A disaster took place, and I can imagine Europeans thinking about reparation as well: How can I help people in this region? This is a humanitarian, transnational issue: How can I help? I will try to bring these people here, and I will try to help them in building a life for themselves. France declared itself the country of immigrants. This will immobilize and frame the picture of this place. Art coming from our country is art that contains tragedy and violence, which have become a part of our lives. But there are

personal things that we can talk about through art. I may be Syrian and talk about roses in South Africa in a movie. The identity of Syrian art was determined, and it was not associated with stereotypes, but with the way we present ourselves.

There is an easy way out. We work on the Syrian tragedy in a superficial way. Surely, when you enter a destroyed place and you shoot for several hours, you can create a montage. In the end, the destruction alone does not make a movie. There is a difference between a good and a bad movie, even if we're talking about a tragedy. The work will not be given value only because it addresses the Syrian situation. The same applies to visual arts. I respect people's efforts, and I am not going to give my assessment. But I cannot stop myself from saying that a particular work is bad at the visual level. It's true that you're portraying a massacre, but what's behind this?

Jumana: This is somehow related to my next question, which is about ethics. How can we see, watch or assess an artwork that portrays a tragedy that hasn't ended yet? We are not going to recall or create events. There are people who are still suffering to this day. We might know some of them personally, and they might be suffering close by. Can we criticize a work, whether it's a movie, a play or a story, that addresses and documents what is happening in Syria, but that has poor artistic value? How do we put a price on a Syrian Guernica painting?

Mohamad: This is a controversial topic. In the end, this is an artist's creation and product. How do I put a price on that? This is very important. I am not creating a product for my own personal enjoyment only. It's true that this work is the result of a tragedy, but it's ultimately still work. Whoever wishes to own it should pay its price. It's an ugly thing, but it's the truth. Picasso participated in the global exhibition. When you want to put your product on display, there are certain rules. Thus, things have changed. There shouldn't be a constant celebration of what Syrians are doing. The last four years might be a blur. Personally, I was living with this blur. Perhaps violence was blocking equal standards. How do you see things in an impartial way? Today, the incident is still unfolding, but you can put some distance, even emotionally. It might be the case, I'm not sure.

Jumana: Mohamad Omran, you are still practicing your profession in France, in addition to being a Syrian artist. You are part of this country's artistic sccene. What is your relationship with what's been going on around you artistically, in a practical or more technical way? What is your relationship with the French artistic community and with the galleries and art market in France? I will take it further and ask, do you consider yourself involved in French politics? Do you follow French news? Is your work affected by what's happening politically?

Mohamad: In relation to the technical and practical aspect, I haven't been able to collaborate and work with a local gallery, if we were to consider this a condition for being a professional. This does not mean that I do not have connections. I have friends who are artists, and I try to build connections from time to time and to network with people. My work and my relationships are connected to the Arab world. I think all migrants have this in common. This does not mean we do not have opportunities to showcase our work here, although this is true from time to time. I display my work more in Beirut and in Gulf States. With regard to work here, it is more about time. I've been living here since 2007, but I realized in 2013 that everything is over and that I'm staying here. You can say that I've been here since 2013.

Between 2007 and 2013, I did not try to display my work here, and I did not wish to do so. Things were clear to me. When I finish my studies, I will return immediately. I did not care about building relationships. But today, I feel that this is my semi-final place, and I should work on

this. I think, ultimately, time is all we need. This is what makes me say that I love this place. It is (open), just like Europe in general. It – always – has new experiences, productions and cultures, which is good. I listen to the news all the time. I work while listening to the radio and the news.

This is a chance for me to listen to the French language and to know what is happening every day. This means a lot to me. I cannot vote yet, but when I eventually have that right, I will. And I have an idea about the party I will vote for. How I deal with this is different than how the French deal with it. But I always meet with French people to ask them about their relationship with politics or society, and with what is happening daily. It means a lot to me. What it means to me today is different, because I can know the future of this place based on it. In the end, my daughter lives here, so I care to know where we're headed.

Jumana: You look into the future as Mohamad Omran and as a human being. But how do you look into the future though your work?

Mohamad: Through my work… It is difficult to answer. What I know is that I'm a relatively open person, so I can try to use new media for example. The focus of my work is still sculpting. And there are many things that I haven't created yet. I am a sculptor until my artistic journey ends. This does not stop me from making different productions. I cannot answer, because I do not make plans for my work. Instead, I work on emotional, momentary and current things.

Jumana: I had a discussion with Eckhard Thiemann, the Director of Shubbak Festival in London, and he said to me: "The Syrian artist's crisis hasn't begun yet." From his point of view, the Syrian artist's crisis begins once they become deeply rooted in their new place, and when Syria becomes a distant topic in the news, such that they will ask: What can I currently do? This is where the real crisis begins.

Mohamad: I agree with part of this. I am personally living what he talked about. In 2013, I realized that I am not going back. I lived through a period of mourning. But what I do not agree with is that he considered creativity to be centered around Syria or what's happening in Syria. I think this vision isn't true. I – definitely – work on current events, but I also have something personal I want to say. As such, the challenge is how can I find the way, tools or method to do this, and it means a lot to me to share this with others, these personal things and the way I see the world. I think this is the most important thing. The challenge isn't the art market or the galleries. That's a given.

Time plays an important role. The artist builds their confidence in this place, and when a chance presents itself, they can make it all happen. But this is secondary. The essential thing is to ask: where is my product and where is my identity? I believe it is an endless question, at least to me. I ask this question daily. I work six hours a day and think about what to do, and I cannot find the answer. The answer comes from personal comfort. When I'm done, I say: If what I did is good, I can move on to another topic. Recently, I am focusing my interest on how to build new characters through my relationships with others. I am working on a specific topic that is the audience, but it is complicated. What do I want to present? What will the audience say? What should I do through sculpting? The characters are laughing, why are people laughing? These are questions that lie at the heart of creativity for me. But the topic of Syria and the violent events is eternal. It may take a different and new form after ten years, just like all the artworks we see which address old events.

The Lebanese war is still a phenomenon in artworks to date. It is presented in different ways, whether commercial or of high quality. It is not an existential crisis. Artists who appeared after the revolution

adapted to their new lives, established their workshops and homes, and raised their children, just like all Syrians. This is what happened, and so they had to move. The difficulty now is to mourn the past. There are many people who are not aware of this problem yet. Whoever hopes to return is delusional. If you were to ask: Should we go back or not? Regardless of the political aspects, we say we can go back when everyone agrees. The question is: What will we do there? We can visit Syria for two weeks and work on a project with people there, and that's it.

Jumana: In one of the texts in the *Assemblage* book, there is a call for hope. There is a text called Hope. Personally, I feel we are defeated. There is a new type of defeat, different than the one we experienced in 1976. We are living a new defeat today, but it's not directly called that. What do you think?

Mohamad: I do not consider this phase we're going through to be a defeat. I see it as the mother of all disasters. What happened changed people's fates: those who stayed and those who left, those who supported the revolution and those who supported the regime. Everyone's fates changed. But I find that resistance is a beautiful thing. A realist may say that this place is done. But what we can do is not give up on our relationship with our work, for example; that is to say, I am here against my will in this place and I have a family. Therefore, I should work here and live. This does not mean that I will forget about the other place. I am against the idea of integration, in the shallow sense of the word. I belong to that place to this day and I think I will belong to it until I die. But that place has become ugly and I do not want to visit it for the time being. If I wanted to go back, it's only to visit my parents. I do not have the courage to face that place with all the changes that occurred therein. I am afraid I will get lost in the street. So I believe that the matter is settled.

We experience this problem because it concerns us. However, everyone experienced it. I met a lot of people, some of whom had parents who lived during the revolution in Iran, the first generation who hasn't visited Iran in 30 years. This is a common issue. The place and migration. I think it is a human process. Humans are immigrants. This is their nature. And they settle wherever they find a place that could provide them with their needs. This does not mean that we lose hope. Hope is a utopia. What is hope? Hope is related to my daily actions, and I will surely not give up. The truth is we lost, and we should admit this. But we should always keep on working.

Jumana: Thank you, Mohamad.

Mohamad: Thank you, Jumana.

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